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FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS

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INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001086

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/16/2029

TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM VE

SUBJECT: EDUCATION LAW PROMULGATED, OPPOSITION CALLS FOR A

REFERENDUM

REF: A. CARACAS 1080

1B. CARACAS 777

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Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Darnall Steuart, for reasons
1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) Summary: The Education Law was passed by the National Assembly late August 13, promulgated by President Chavez at a televised rally on August 15, and published in an extraordinary issue of the Official Gazette on August 15. Opposition politicians, leading educators, and the Catholic Church have strongly denounced it. On August 16 opponents announced that they may demand a referendum on the law. Also on August 16, Chavez said that the new law must be implemented immediately, and called on students to ensure it is implemented in their classrooms. The student movement is calling for a major march against the law on August 22. End Summary.

RAPID PROMULGATION, EMPHASIS ON IMPLEMENTATION

12. (C) President Chavez promulgated the Education Law in a signing ceremony that closely resembled a political rally on August 15, less than 48 hours after the law was passed by the National Assembly around midnight on August 13 (ref A). The hours-long signing event was designated a "cadena", requiring all television and radio stations to broadcast it live. In an auditorium filled with students and National Assembly members wearing red, President Chavez applauded the efforts of everyone who had worked on the education law, saying that "we need our education to create a new society." He announced the imminent formation, by presidential decree, of the commission that will implement the law and establish "the revolutionary changes." Chavez emphasized the parts of the law that stipulated higher investment in education, and charged the opposition with "madness and political irrationality" for opposing it. Chavez repeated these themes at length on his "Alo' President" television show on August 16, also designated a national "cadena."

WIDESPREAD OPPOSITION TO "THE CUBAN LAW"

13. (C) Students, teachers, university leaders, and opposition politicians reacted immediately to the law's approval on August 13, denouncing it as "the Cuban Law" that had been passed without public consultation. Governor of

Miranda State Henrique Capriles Radonski said on August 14 "what is this Assembly doing? They're passing laws in the middle of the night when people are sleeping? The people must be consulted." Mayor of Greater Caracas Antonio Ledezma called for a "cacerola" at 8 PM on August 14, where people bang pots and pans from their windows in protest, and the protests continued throughout the weekend. The Archbishop of Caracas sent a letter to all priests in Caracas to be read during Sunday mass August 16, sharply criticizing the law for "trying to remove God from the classroom." The student movement has announced it is organizing a march in opposition to the law on August 22. On August 16 the opposition politicians, student groups, and PODEMOS National Assembly members called for a national referendum on the law.

¶4. (C) Comment: Chavez's previous attempts to change the education system over the past several years faced stiff popular resistance, effectively preventing a new law from being approved by the National Assembly. This year he chose to introduce the law in August, when schools are closed and many Venezuelans are on vacation, and the law successfully made it through the National Assembly and into the Official Gazette. Chavez's vocal public declarations on the need for immediate implementation - and for students and all citizens to ensure that the opposition does not prevent its implementation - seems to indicate confidence in the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's (GBRV's) ability to implement the law over strong popular resistance. The opposition's strategy is to pair protests with a popular referendum, which has worked at the municipality level to slow the GBRV agenda (ref B). (Note: This may be too hard to do, according to one prominent local politician. End Note.) If successful, the opposition's tactics would effectively question Chavez's claim to popular support for socialist education in particular, and the "Bolivarian Revolution" in general. Implementation of this law will directly affect the

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lives of millions of Venezuelans, and will be another step in Chavez's socialist revolution and his quest for absolute power.

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